Testimony of Roger Johnson
National Farmers Union

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight,
Nutrition, and Forestry

To Review the Status of
Information Technology at USDA

Wednesday, March 10, 2010
Washington, D.C.

SUBMITTED TESTIMONY OF ROGER JOHNSON, PRESIDENT

NATIONAL FARMERS UNION

BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT, NUTRITION AND
FORESTRY

CONCERNING: REVIEW THE STATUS OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AT USDA

MARCH 10, 2010

Chairman Baca, Ranking Member Fortenberry and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the status of information technology at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). My name is Roger Johnson and I am president of the National Farmers Union (NFU). NFU is a national organization that has represented family farmers and ranchers and rural residents for more than 100 years. NFU members understand the critical role modern information technology systems play in the efficient and effective delivery of farm programs.

New technological solutions are available and USDA has been pursuing significant modernization in recent years. Yet, we know that progress has been slow. Advances that could be made in areas such as data storage and sharing, geographical information systems (GIS) and reduced service delivery continue to be impeded by a system has not adapted to the times. In today's competitive global marketplace, American farmers are being asked to produce more food, fiber and fuel with greater precision and efficiency, and they are answering the call by investing in new technological systems. As the primary agency tasked with providing support and assistance to farmers, it is only logical that USDA would do the same.

With advances in web-based technology and geographical information systems, opportunities exist for USDA to realize gains in efficiency and effectiveness by providing producers greater ability for self-service while simultaneously reducing costs, paperwork and travel time required to apply for programs and service contracts. Coordinating web-based efforts to provide services to producers will require a new approach, new technology and new ways of managing data. USDA has begun this process, but much work remains to be done.

Current Status

The current status of the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) computer systems remains unstable and has resulted in service disruption to producers. This is despite the fact that Congress has made significant investments in USDA's Common Computing Environment (CCE). Currently, USDA runs a complex suite of 30 program applications based on a distributed technology platform that relies on antiquated computer code known as COBOL. Program data is kept on computers at county-based service centers and fed into central mainframe computers to process program information. This significantly impedes data sharing across boundaries, whether programmatic, geographical or organizational in nature. This IT infrastructure impacts

interagency coordination in program delivery, impacts workload balancing and reduces capacity for customer service. The system has also proven sluggish to adapt to new programs. As the 2008 Farm Bill programs are implemented, field offices have often found frustration as systems have not been ready, data transfers between agencies have had to be done manually and standard operating procedures have been written piecemeal.

Producers have reported that the system is slow to respond when legislative changes are made. The sign up for 2008 SURE program payments is a good example. Sign up recently began for 2008 SURE payments, but a number of producers reported development of the programs designed for them took a long time. This resulted in a sign up window so small that many missed their opportunity to apply. Farmers and ranchers struggle to maintain the records and necessary documentation during the lengthy process to develop a working system.

The current system is outdated, unstable and is not cost-effective in the delivery of farm programs. Over the past few years, the system has become unstable several times resulting in a near shut down in operations across the country. While temporary solutions have maintained system operations, other failures, perhaps catastrophic, are likely as the system is continually overburdened. Complete failure of this struggling system would have enormous consequences for commodity, conservation, crop insurance and disaster program delivery across the nation.

Funding

USDA has received significant funding for information technology systems. Congress has provided over $700 million since 2002 for the USDA CCE. In addition to regular appropriations, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided an additional $50 million to maintain and modernize the information and technology system.

The Appropriations Committees have been trying to find a way to pay for the necessary upgrade for several years, but with all of the other demands for discretionary spending it has nearly impossible to provide the level of funding needed.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has reported that maintenance of the existing CCE system is costly because of aging and obsolete machines for which replacement parts are neither widely available nor cheap to procure. Creation and maintenance of programs is also complicated by the fact that few programmers exist with knowledge of the COBOL programming language. As a result, a large portion of USDA's CCE funding has gone to maintaining an increasingly expensive but outdated system.

MIDAS

USDA's current effort underway to update and modernize their aging computer system is known as "Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agriculture Systems," or MIDAS. The goal of MIDAS is to provide better service to customers in today's Internet age through web-based technologies. MIDAS holds great promise in significantly modernizing FSA's technology infrastructure, but managerial and logistical issues must be addressed to ensure it is implemented in a smooth and timely manner.

In 2008, FSA completed a comprehensive organizational review and assessment that found MIDAS lacking in the areas of project management, intra-agency coordination, human capital planning and change management. In 2008, the GAO reviewed progress on implementation of MIDAS after USDA's decision to accelerate implementation from a ten-year to a two-year schedule. GAO found that managerial and logistical weaknesses existed that made uncertain the delivery of MIDAS within acceptable cost schedules and timeframes.

The GAO report recommended measures for USDA to increase coordination between the department's and FSA's chief information officers to develop specific plans for tracking user-reported problems and to clearly define roles. The GAO also recommended a full assessment of USDA's investment in MIDAS including establishing effective and reliable cost estimates and a realistic and reliable implementation schedule.

Geospatial Data

In an effort to provide information to a variety of stakeholders, USDA maintains a vast database of aerial imagery and other geospatial data. Administration of these efforts requires robust data management facilities and procedures, expertise in image collection and organization, effective quality assurance measures and the capability of delivering the data in formats that meet customer requirements.

Updated information technology systems could greatly reduce the delivery time of current imagery acquired for use in farm programs. The computer interface with geospatial data at the field office level is critical for USDA employees to be able to access needed resources. Current deficiencies in the field office computer system often make accessing geospatial data slow and cumbersome if not impossible. The advanced application of geospatial data in servicing contracts would greatly enhance producer use of GIS in precision agriculture. While producers could provide GIS information from their equipment, the information would be lost on a USDA computing system not equipped to handle it. Similarly, geospatial information could also be utilized in making disaster assessments and payments were it readily available.

Closing

Updating USDA information technology system is a task for which there may be no finish line in sight. IT continues to advance by leaps and bounds, and keeping up with the latest technologies is a constant and costly challenge across all sectors. It is perhaps most acute in the public sector where change is slow and operating budgets remain very tight and are receiving greater scrutiny. Much has been done in the past decade to position USDA to make the next technological leap.

We support continued investment in USDA's IT overhaul. Updating the system to 21st century standards will not only improve USDA's business practices, it will also result in better customer service for producers that will ultimately be good for American agriculture as it seeks to meet the challenges of providing for a growing population. While work still remains to get the job done, we are confident that with proper management strategies, adequate resources and

proper planning USDA can meet the challenge of harnessing information technology in a way that will benefit our nation's farmers and ranchers.

I thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.

BIOGRAPHY

Roger Johnson
National Farmers Union President

Roger Johnson was elected National Farmers Union's 14th president during the organization's 107th anniversary convention in 2009.

Prior to leading the family farm organization, Johnson, a third-generation family farmer from Turtle Lake, N.D., served as North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner, a position he was first elected to in 1996. While Agriculture Commissioner, Johnson served on the State Industrial Commission, the North Dakota Trade Office Advisory Board, and the State Board of Agricultural Research and Education, among many other boards and commissions.

From 2007-2008, Johnson served as president of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA). As NASDA president, he played a key role in crafting the 2008 Farm Bill, pressing for provisions that benefit agricultural producers, such as a permanent disaster program, ending the ban on interstate shipment of state-inspected meat, the re-balancing of loan rates for program crops and farm-based renewable energy. Johnson was chairman of NASDA's Rural Development and Financial Security Committee from 2000 to 2007.

Johnson is a past president of the Midwestern Association of State Departments of Agriculture (MASDA), past president of the Food Export Association of the Midwest and a former chairman of the Interstate Pest Control Compact.

Johnson grew up in Farmers Union, participating in the organization's youth programs, serving as a county president and chairman of the board of a local Farmers Union cooperative. Johnson graduated from North Dakota State University with a degree in agricultural economics.

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2007.

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Organization you represent (if any):   National Farmers Union

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1.   Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) **you** have received since October 1, 2007, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source:_____   Amount:_____

Source:_____   Amount:_____

2.   If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) **the organization** has received since October 1, 2007, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source:_____   Amount:_____

Source:_____   Amount:_____

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: ✓

Signature: _____

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*